

# Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?”

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Turning Research into Classroom Practice: AKA “So What!?” is a bridge to disseminate research into the classroom. A research informed instructor is an up-to-date instructor! In this feature, an article from the Merchandising discipline of Family and Consumer Sciences is examined. A quick review of the article is followed by real and practical applications that can be incorporated into the classroom.

## Article citation:

Ma, Y.J. & Lee, H.-H. (2012). Incorporating an authentic learning strategy into undergraduate apparel and merchandising curriculum. *Journal of Experimental Education*, 35(1), 272-289.

## Quick review of the article:

This article covers the process of incorporating active learning practices into a merchandising curriculum. The authors review the literature and then discuss their mixed method (quantitative and qualitative) study which analyzed the effect of the curriculum change.

The authors first review the literature, which is vast, on related classroom innovations. They begin by reviewing “authentic learning” as an “educational movement” which aims to connect student learning with real life experiences. In this way, students learn what it is like to work with real problems and questions in an authentic work situation. They learn collaboration, seeing the issue from multiple perspectives, and how to work in different geographic locations. With the globalization of the workplace, it is important for employees to work with each other to solve a problem.

One of the strengths of these types of experiences is the fact that other disciplines have been doing this type of project over the past 20 years or so. These disciplines include physics, mathematics, and marketing, to name a few. Building on the past successes, provides a valuable foundation for the authors of this article. They note one example of authentic learning in which students worked with a local zoo on an advertising campaign. These real life experiences are invaluable for students. Some of the positive results from past research on the field are that students increase communication skills, learn to work in a team, and enhance their research skills. On the other side, some drawbacks are that students have reported the process is time consuming and confusing.

The authors review research on authentic learning, student-centered learning, and service-learning. The latter two are similar to authentic learning in that they must have high student participation as well. Student-centered learning focuses on critical thinking and improving students' motivation to learn. Service-learning involves community focused projects and application of classroom knowledge in these projects. In summary, the authors conclude that all of these classroom innovations are important to student learning.

These authors sought to infuse collaborative learning into their curriculum. Specifically, they had students pose as a client (one group) and a consultant (other group) to work on a specific project. Their courses, product development (1<sup>st</sup> course - clients) and economics of fashion (2<sup>nd</sup> course - consultants), included 49 students in total. They created a project scenario for the students and had students work in teams of 5 or 6 (including a product, outsourcing needs, production calendar, target market, etc.). Consultants provided a production plan, and clients provided an entire product line. They shared videotapes with each other of their respective presentations.

To analyze the results of the study and the effectiveness of the project, a questionnaire was given to students. They ranked their experience on a 7 point Likert style scale, answering 14 questions. They also gave students an opportunity to share via 5 open-ended questions. Both quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed. In total, 44 students completed the survey. All students were female and a majority were seniors or juniors; most were white.

Descriptive results of the survey questions are presented in the article, and may be interesting for an instructor to review and use in their own classroom. Overall, students rated the experience positively with means from 5-6 on a 7 point scale. In terms of the qualitative results, 5 themes emerged: improving communication skills, enhancing professionalism through real-life experiences, enhancing team building, learning through interaction, and improving research skills. Quotes were used to embellish these findings, some of which are "Not meeting with someone and just communicating with email is hard. It is hard to know what they want exactly unless they are very specific and clear in their emails", "It was a very practical real-life experience. I enjoyed that the project was practical and had an element of real for related experience", and "I learned the importance of working with a group and trying to work through the differences between team members.

Authors concluded with noting that overall, the experience was positive and valuable in an upper-division classroom setting. They also noted that generalizability to others is limited. The authors caution that while the experience is valuable for students, the true complexities of the apparel industry are not completely reflected in an exercise of this nature.

### Practice or “So What!?”... how can I apply this in my classroom?:

Students and faculty in the Merchandising discipline can benefit from information presented in this article. Classroom exercises that are innovative and cutting edge serve both faculty and students. The practices employed and discussed in this article provide interesting applications for classroom use. The following are activities for students to apply concepts from the article:

- a) Have students discuss the importance of communication in the workplace. What are some skills they should exhibit to be an effective worker?
- b) Ask students to discuss the differences between authentic learning, service learning and student centered learning. How are they similar? How are they different?
- c) Have students discuss in small groups classes they have taken that involved working with students at a distance. Has this worked? How?
- d) Ask students to get in small groups and discuss service learning opportunities. Have they taken any classes that incorporate this innovation? And, if not, what types of merchandising activities would they like to participate in for classroom credit?
- e) Have a class discussion about the value of real world experiences while in school. Do students like this type of work? Do they think it is a valuable use of classroom time?
- f) Provide the survey questions to one of your classes after a major assignment is completed. Ask students to discuss pros and cons of the assignment.
- g) Ask students to interview someone in the manufacturing industry. What are the complexities involved in their work? Repeat this exercise for the design industry? How are the issues the same or different?
- h) Invite professionals from product development as well as marketing and merchandising to the classroom to discuss how they work together. Have students prepare questions for them.
- i) Have students write a public service announcement aimed at college professors promoting the use of authentic learning in the classroom. What types of things would they focus on?